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President's News Conference on Foreign and Domestic Matters

Following is a transcript of President Reagan's news conference in Washington last night, as recorded by The New York Times:

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

U.S. Military Plans

Q. Mr. President, you complain of too much tension. How can the people ignore two battiship groups, thousands of combat troops going to Honduras, you defend the covert funding of 10,000 rebels — Nicaraguan rebels. My question, and all these things have happened since April 27, the question, sir, is in seeking solutions, how far will you go militarily? And I'd like to follow up.

A. Well I have told you. We have no military plans for intervention of that kind. We have 55 mainly noncommissioned officers helping to train the Salvadoran Army. We know that Cuba has somewhere in the neighborhood, has thousands of military personnel in Nicaragua. It does seem a little overbalanced with regard to the attention that is being paid to 35 as against attention that's being paid to the thousands. The — I suppose what my question is, Helen, back — answer to the question is — why are maneuvers that we have performed before and regularly suddenly treated with such suspicion when only — well within this year, last spring we had military maneuvers in Honduras. And last year we had naval maneuvers in the Caribbean, and no one seemed to be excited about them at all. So, it's just that there's no confidence in the fact that when I say these are maneuvers of the kind we've been holding regularly and for years.

Q. But they're unprecedented to last six month. The polls show of the American people are not for them and they fear it may lead to war and my question is remembering the lessons of Vietnam, does this bother you and do they have any say?

A. First of all there is no comparison with Vietnam and there's not going to be anything of that kind in this, and maybe the people are disturbed because of the confused pattern that's been presented to them and the constant drumbeat with regard to the fact of suspicion that somehow there is an ulterior purpose in this. It hardly seems to me that those ships are going there — and I don't know that they're going to be there six months. I don't know what the length of time for the training is. I don't know the number of ships involved. But I didn't know the number that were involved in the Caribbean exercises. But if they were there for some kind of a hostile purpose — we happen to know that right now a Soviet freighter, the Ulianov, is approaching the port of Corinto in the vicinity of Nicaragua. That port is in Nicaragua. And it is carrying a load of military equipment — helicopters, transport helicopters for military purposes and so forth, and no one shot at them.

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Expansion of Covert Aid

Q. Mr. President, is it true that you're planning a vast expansion of covert aid to the anti-Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua? And what would Congressional action to cut off such aid mean to your efforts in Central America?

A. Well I think it would be a very, very grave mistake if the Legislature interfered with what we're trying to do and we're trying to keep them apprised of our actions. I can't answer your question about covert aid. I think this is like discussing intelligence matters. If you discuss covert aid, it's no longer covert. So I can only tell you that we're continuing on a policy that we believe is aimed at, first of all, bringing about peace in El Salvador, hopefully through negotiations with those who are presently radicals and fighting as guerrillas. And in Nicaragua, hoping that we can persuade the Nicaraguan, the Sandinista Government, to return to the principles of the revolution and which they in writing guaranteed to the Organization of American States, what's going to be the policy of their government.

Q. About the covert aid, Mr. President, given the fact that these covert operations are not so covert anymore, haven't we reached a point where it really might make more sense to do things on an overt basis and, in other words, hasn't the thing really become counterproductive?

A. No. No, I don't think so. And I think what we're doing is well within the limits of common sense and those who are attempting to make it impossible for us to bring aid down in that area, I think are the ones who are building up, if they have their way, to a giant headache down the road ways. And we're trying to prevent such a headache from coming about.

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